

NPWS

**Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC
(site code: 90)**

**Conservation objectives supporting document -
marine species**

**Version 1
April 2015**

Introduction

Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC is designated for the Annex II species *Phoca vitulina* (harbour seal, also known as common seal).

In addition to the records compiled from historical Wildlife Service site visits (Summers et al., 1980; Warner, 1983; Harrington, 1990; Lyons, 2004), more detailed investigations of harbour seal population status and seasonal habitat use within the site have taken a number of forms. Firstly, regular surveys for the species have been conducted in the area since the mid-1980s (Heardman et al., 2006), while a coordinated regional monitoring programme which includes this site has also been in place in Ireland since 2009 (NPWS, 2010, 2011, 2012). A nationwide harbour seal population assessment was also conducted during the moult season in August 2003 (Cronin et al., 2004) and this broad-scale national survey effort was repeated in August and early September 2011 and 2012 (Duck & Morris, 2013). In intervening years a PhD study centred on the species in south-western Ireland was also conducted, based out of University College Cork (Cronin, 2007). The distribution and abundance data arising from all such efforts have been considered in the preparation of this document. Aspects of the biology and ecology of Annex II species are provided in Section 1. The corresponding site-specific conservation objective will facilitate Ireland delivering on its surveillance and reporting obligations under the EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EC).

Ireland also has an obligation to ensure that consent decisions concerning operations/activities planned for Natura 2000 sites are informed by an appropriate assessment where the likelihood of such operations or activities having a significant effect on the site cannot be excluded. Further ancillary information concerning the practical application of the site-specific objectives and targets in the completion of such assessments is provided in Section 2.

Section 1

Annex II Marine mammals

PHOCA VITULINA (HARBOUR SEAL)

This marine mammal species occurs in estuarine, coastal and offshore waters but also utilises a range of intertidal and terrestrial habitats for important life history functions such as breeding, moulting, resting and social activity. Its aquatic range for foraging and inter-site movement extends into continental shelf waters. When hauling out ashore, harbour seals tend to prefer comparatively sheltered locations where exposure to wind, wave action and precipitation, for example, are minimised. Thus in Ireland the species is more commonly found ashore in sheltered bays, inlets and enclosed estuaries.

Harbour seals in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC occupy both aquatic habitats and intertidal shorelines that become exposed during the tidal cycle. The species is present at the site throughout the year during all aspects of its annual life cycle which includes breeding (May to July approx.), moulting (August to September approx.) and non-breeding foraging and resting phases. In particular, comparatively limited information is available from the latter period in the annual cycle spanning the months of October to April inclusive. In acknowledging the limited understanding of aquatic habitat use by the species within the site it should be noted that all suitable aquatic habitat is considered relevant to the species range and ecological requirements at the site and is therefore of potential use by harbour seals.

Harbour seals are vulnerable to disturbance during periods in which time is spent ashore, or in shallow waters, by individuals or groups of animals. This occurs immediately prior to and during the annual breeding season which takes place predominantly during the months of May to July. Pups are born on land, usually on sheltered shorelines, islets or skerries and uninhabited islands removed from the risk of predation and human interference. While there may be outliers in any year, specific established locations tend to be used annually for breeding-associated behaviour by adult males, adult females and their newborn pups. Such habitats are critical to the maintenance of the species within any site. Pups are able to swim soon after birth and may be observed accompanying their mother close to shore in the early days or weeks of life. They are nursed for a period of several weeks by the mother prior to weaning and abandonment. During this period adult females mate with adult males, an activity that takes place in the water. Current data on breeding locations selected by harbour seals in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC is comparatively limited. Known and suitable habitats for the species in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC during the breeding season are indicated in figure 1. These include many small islands and skerries situated within the harbour, such as Powers Rock, Sunken Island, Bark Island, Otter Rock, Otter Island, Garvillan, Ship Island and Garinish.

The necessity for individual seals to undergo an annual moult (i.e. hair shedding and replacement), which generally results in seals spending more time ashore during a relatively discrete season, provides an opportunity to record the minimum number of harbour seals occurring in a given area (i.e. minimum population estimate). Moulting is considered an intensive, energetically-demanding process which incurs further vulnerability for individuals during this period. Terrestrial or intertidal locations where seals can be found ashore are known as haul-out sites. The harbour seal moult season takes place predominantly during the months of August to September. A combined total of 134 harbour seals were recorded ashore within Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC during a national aerial survey for the species in August 2003. A comparable repeat aerial survey in early September 2012 recorded 156 harbour seals within the site, while higher totals have occasionally been recorded during annual site monitoring in recent years. Suitable habitat for the species along with known moult haul-out locations in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC are indicated in figure 2. These include many small islands and skerries situated within the harbour, such as Powers Rock, Sunken Island, Bark Island, Otter Rock, Otter Island, Garvillan, Ship Island and Garinish.

Harbour seal is a successful aquatic predator that feeds on a wide variety of fish, cephalopod and crustacean species. For individual harbour seals of all ages intervals between foraging trips in coastal or offshore waters are spent resting ashore at terrestrial or intertidal haul-out sites, or in the water. Outside the breeding and moulting seasons (i.e. from October to April), the location and composition of haul-out groups and individual seals may be different to those normally observed during breeding or moulting. Current information on resting locations selected by harbour seals in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC outside the moulting season is comparatively limited. Known and suitable habitats for resting by the species are indicated in figure 3. These include several small islands and skerries situated within the harbour.

Section 2

Appropriate Assessment Notes

Many operations/activities of a particular nature and/or size require the preparation of an environmental impact statement of the likely effects of their planned development. While smaller operations/activities (i.e. sub threshold developments) are not required to prepare such statements, an appropriate assessment and Natura Impact Statement is required to inform the decision-making process in or adjacent to Natura 2000 sites. The purpose of such an assessment is to record in a transparent and reasoned manner the likely effects on a Natura 2000 site of a proposed development. General guidance on the completion of such assessments has been prepared and is available at www.npws.ie

Objective **To maintain the favourable conservation condition of harbour seal in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC which is defined by the following list of attributes and targets**

Target 1	Species range within the site should not be restricted by artificial barriers to site use.
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- This target may be considered relevant to proposed activities or operations that will result in the permanent exclusion of harbour seal from part of its range within the site, or will permanently prevent access for the species to suitable habitat therein.
- It does not refer to short-term or temporary restriction of access or range.
- Early consultation or scoping with the Department in advance of formal application is advisable for proposals that are likely to result in permanent exclusion.

Target 2	Conserve the breeding sites in a natural condition.
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- This target is relevant to proposed activities or operations that will result in significant interference with or disturbance of (a) breeding behaviour by harbour seal within the site and/or (b) aquatic/terrestrial/intertidal habitat used during the annual breeding season.
- Operations or activities that cause displacement of individuals from a breeding site or alteration of natural breeding behaviour, and that may result in higher mortality or reduced reproductive success, would be regarded as significant and should therefore be avoided.

Target 3	Conserve the moult haul-out sites in a natural condition.
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- This target is relevant to proposed activities or operations that will result in significant interference with or disturbance of (a) moulting behaviour by harbour seal within the site and/or (b) aquatic/terrestrial/intertidal habitat used during the annual moult.

- Operations or activities that cause displacement of individuals from a moult haul-out site or alteration of natural moulting behaviour to an extent that may ultimately interfere with key ecological functions would be regarded as significant and should therefore be avoided.

Target 4 Conserve the resting haul-out sites in a natural condition.

- This target is relevant to proposed activities or operations that will result in significant interference with or disturbance of (a) resting behaviour by harbour seal within the site and/or (b) aquatic/terrestrial/intertidal habitat used for resting.
- Operations or activities that cause displacement of individuals from a resting haul-out site to an extent that may ultimately interfere with key ecological functions would be regarded as significant and should therefore be avoided.

Target 5 Human activities should occur at levels that do not adversely affect the harbour seal population at the site.

- Proposed activities or operations should not introduce man-made energy (e.g. aerial or underwater noise, light or thermal energy) at levels that could result in a significant negative impact on individuals and/or the population of harbour seal within the site. This refers to both the aquatic and terrestrial/intertidal habitats used by the species in addition to important natural behaviours during the species' annual cycle.
- This target also relates to proposed activities or operations that may result in the deterioration of key resources (e.g. water quality, feeding, etc) upon which harbour seals depend. In the absence of complete knowledge on the species' ecological requirements in this site, such considerations should be assessed where appropriate on a case-by-case basis.
- Proposed activities or operations should not cause death or injury to individuals to an extent that may ultimately affect the harbour seal population at the site.

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Figure 1. *Phoca vitulina* - Known breeding sites in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC

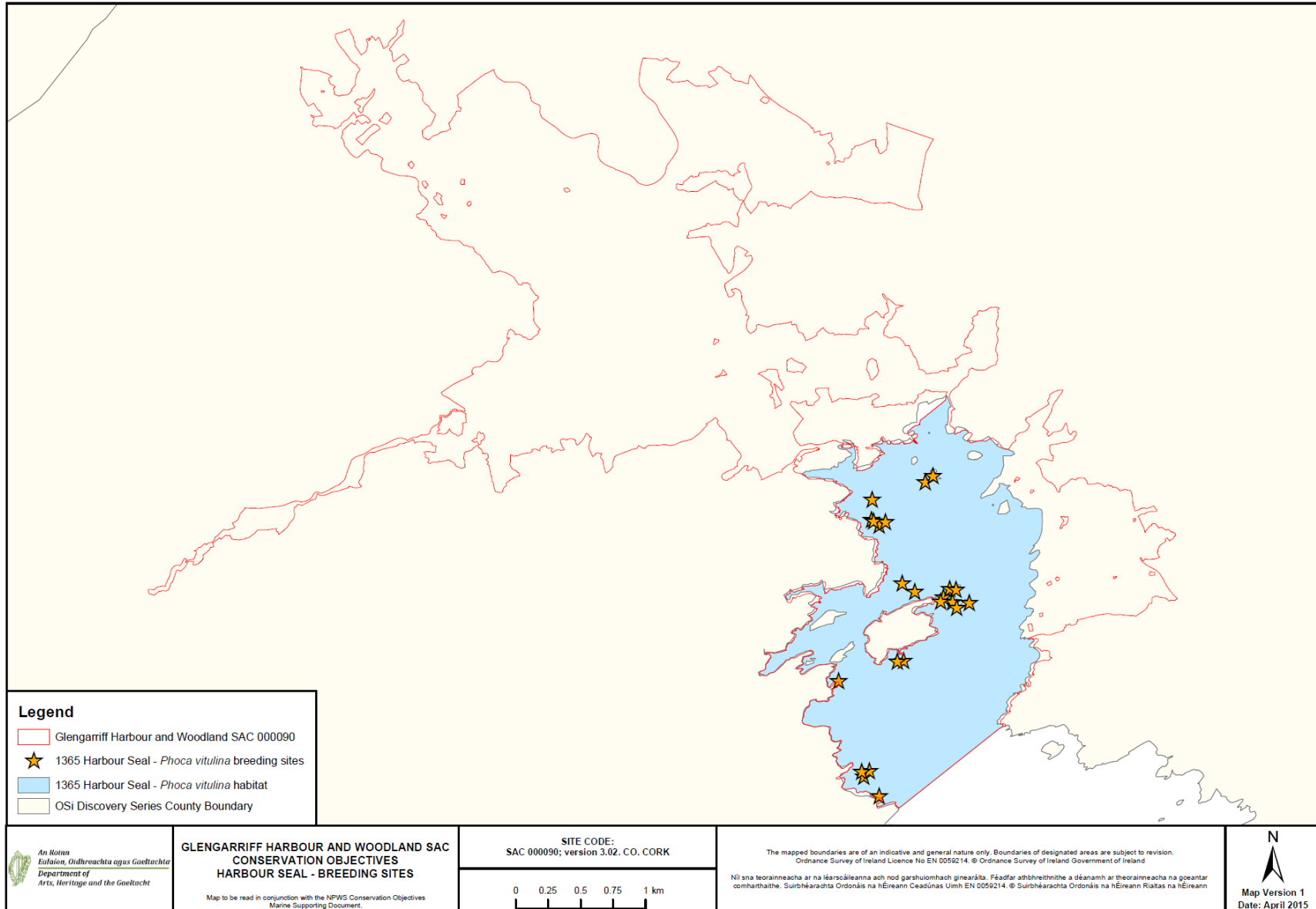


Figure 2. *Phoca vitulina* - Known moult haul-out sites in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC

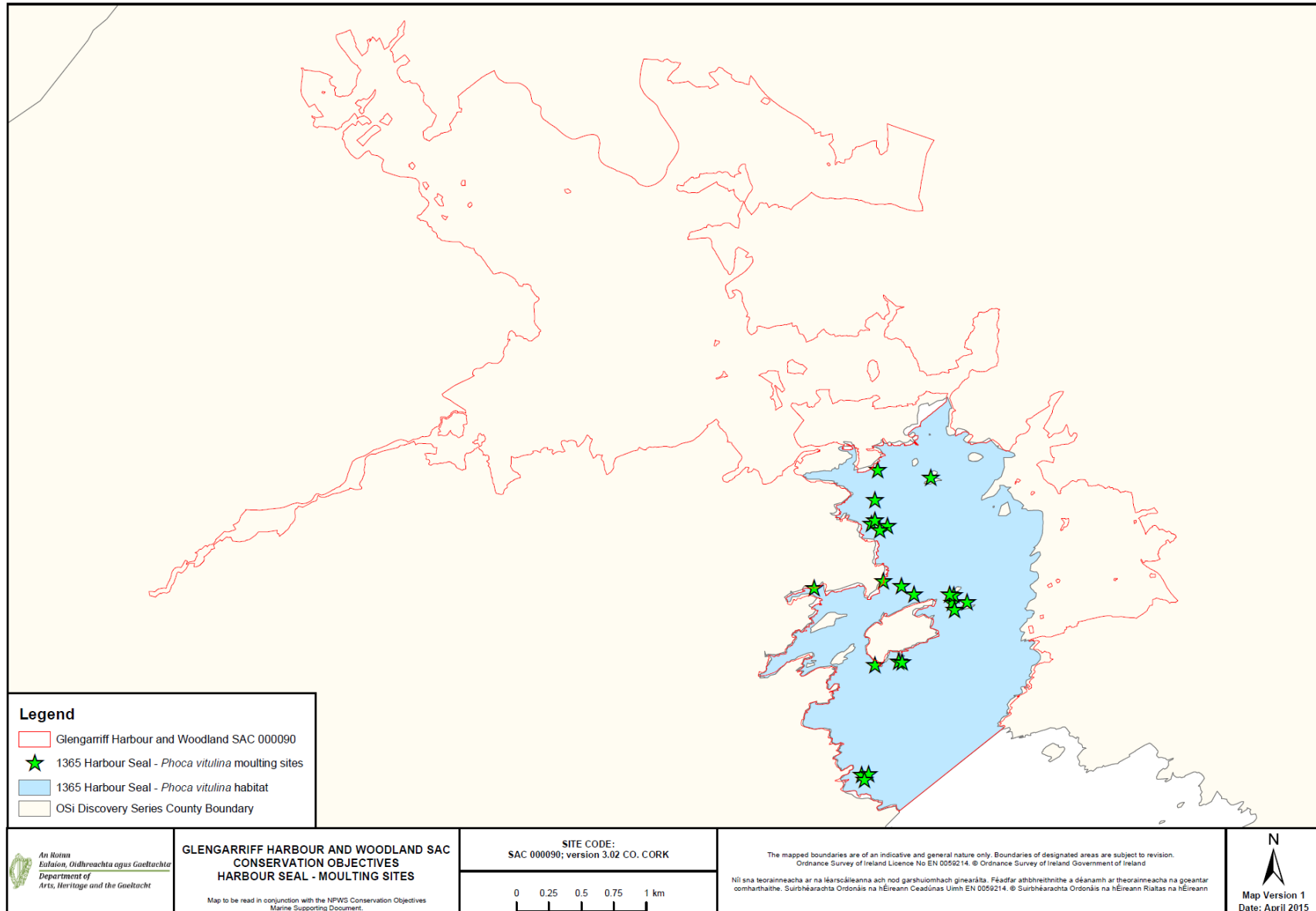


Figure 3. *Phoca vitulina* - Known resting haul-out sites (non-breeding) in Glengarriff Harbour and Woodland SAC

